**STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT**

**Hypothesis**

Traditionally it was believed that prisons were violent, brutal places because of the nature of the guards and inmates who lived and worked in them. Dr. Paul Zimbardo, a psychologist and Stanford University Professor hypothesized that it was not the nature of the people; it was the nature of the roles they were expected to play and the expectations and rules that are attached to those roles. Put any persons in this position, he argued, and they would behave the same way. In The Stanford Experiment, he attempted to prove his hypothesis by putting law-abiding, middle class students in the role of prisoners and guards.

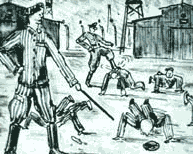
**The Experiment**

To conduct the experiment, Dr. Zimbardo recruited 24 young, middle class students from the United States and Canada. Some were randomly turned into guards, others into inmates. A mock prison was constructed; both the inmates and prisoners were given uniforms. Upon entrance, each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray, to convey our belief that he may have germs or lice. 



The prisoner was then issued a uniform. The main part of this uniform was a dress, or smock, which each prisoner wore at all times with no underclothes. On the smock, in front and in back, was his prison ID number. On each prisoner's right ankle was a heavy chain, bolted on and worn at all times.

The guards were given no specific training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners. The guards were given uniforms and billy clubs but were told to create their own “rules” for maintaining order in the prison. They were also told that they had all of the power in the prison and the prisoners had none. They were to make sure that the prisoners knew it.

Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or institution. When we saw the guards demand push-ups from the prisoners, we initially thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment for a prison -- a rather juvenile and minimal form of punishment. 

However, we later learned that push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps, as can be seen in this drawing by a former concentration camp inmate, Alfred Kantor. It's noteworthy that one of our guards also stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.

Every aspect of the prisoners' behavior fell under the total and arbitrary control of the guards. Even going to the toilet became a privilege which a guard could grant or deny at his whim. Indeed, after the nightly 10:00 P.M. lights out "lock-up," prisoners were often forced to urinate or defecate in a bucket that was left in their cell. On occasion the guards would not allow prisoners to empty these buckets, and soon the prison began to smell of urine and feces -- further adding to the degrading quality of the environment.

The experiment was to last for 14 days, but it was called off after a mere six days when it became clear that the experiment was having a profound effect on the participants. The “guards” had become sadistic and the “prisoners” were depressed and showing signs of extreme stress.

**Ethical Concerns**

There were a variety of criticisms levelled at The Stanford Experiment. Some suggested that there was a disconnect between illusion and reality and the experiment had not actually reconstructed the conditions of an actual prison. The participants, it was argued, were merely playing roles based upon pre-existing stereotypes of guards and prisoners.

There was also a charge that the “guards” and “prisoners” were manipulated into playing certain roles by the instructions they were given and the setup of the prison itself.

Although he defended his experiment by pointing out the numerous controls he had instituted and the fact that the students were all informed beforehand about what they were getting into, even Dr. Zimbardo, in a 1997 interview with the Stanford University News Service, conceded he had concerns. It was unethical he said, "[B]ecause people suffered and others were allowed to inflict pain and humiliation on their fellows over an extended period of time." Then he added, "and yes, although we ended the study a week earlier than planned, we did not end it soon enough." 

It is unlikely that an experiment such as The Stanford Prison Experiment or related experiments like the Milgram Experiment or The Third Wave would be approved today. Concerns about safety (both physical and psychological) and informed consent would likely prevent the mounting of these experiments or the launch of similar experiments.

HSB4U- Case Study Assignment

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **/20** (5 K, 5 T, 5 C, 5 A)

**Read the case study and respond to the following questions.**

1. What is the main idea aspect of social behaviour being studied in this experiment? (Knowledge: /2)
2. What behaviours are expected in the prisoner and guard “roles” (Inquiry: /1)
3. What norms exist in a prison? Why do these norms exist? (Inquiry: /1)
4. Explain the statement that there is a disconnect between reality and role-playing? (Inquiry: /1)
5. Consider the psychological consequences of stripping, delousing, and shaving the heads of prisoners. How would this experience impact a person’s personality in prison? Explain (Communication: /1, Application: /1)
6. Push-ups were considered mild form of punishment. What is the rationale for the use of push-ups as a form of punishment? (Knowledge: /2, Inquiry: /2)
7. The guards behaviour became more repressive as the experiment went on. Why did this occur despite the fact this was not a “real” prison? (Communication: /2)
8. What sort of conclusions might be drawn from the results of this study and what are the implications of these conclusions for our prison system and for society in general? (Application: /2)
9. What are the ethical problems with this experiment? Would this study be considered ethical today? Why? Why not? (Knowledge: /1)
10. What are the reasons in favour and against such a study? In your opinion, was it right to subject these subjects to this kind of suffering in exchange for the information that was gained? (Communication: /2)(Application: /2)